The Baltic Gamble

The War Russia Would Not Have to Win

An essay in the form of a possible December

In September, Maksim voted because his mother told him it was better to vote than not to vote, although neither of them could explain what difference the act was supposed to make. The polling station occupied the ground floor of the school where he had learned mathematics badly and history even worse. There were balloons near the entrance and two policemen outside who looked bored. One of his old teachers sat behind a table. She recognised him, asked after his mother, and then hesitated before asking whether there had been any more news about Anton.

There had been no more news about Anton for almost two years. The official version was short: Anton Sergeyevich Morozov had died while fulfilling his military duty. The longer version existed in pieces—a telephone call, a closed coffin, a medal, several men in uniform, a photograph from somewhere in eastern Ukraine in which Anton was thinner than Maksim remembered him. His mother kept the medal in a kitchen drawer beneath folded plastic bags. She kept Anton's winter boots by the entrance because they had been expensive and because throwing them away would have required deciding that he would never need them again.

Maksim was nineteen.

He marked the ballot paper, folded it and pushed it into the box. Voting stretched across 18, 19 and 20 September. There were posters in the city and reports on television about participation, stability and national unity. Nothing happened that Maksim would later remember as the beginning of anything. He went home, ate dumplings with his mother, played a game on his telephone and fell asleep with one earphone still in his ear.

Nothing about that evening suggested that Russia was approaching another war. But Russia had never really left the previous one.

Years after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, war had ceased to be an interruption and become part of the architecture of Russian life. Factories had reorganised production. Trade had found new routes around sanctions. Energy exports had shifted towards different customers. Military expenditure had entered industries, wages and regional economies. Hundreds of thousands of families had acquired their own private relationship with mobilisation, injury, absence or death. Political language had adapted too. Sacrifice required explanation; explanation required continuity; continuity required an outcome that could still be called victory.

Russia had survived pressures once expected to cripple it, but survival had not returned the country to where it had been before the war. It had created another system.

Adaptation is not freedom from dependency. It is the creation of a new dependency structure.

A state reorganised around confrontation can become increasingly capable of enduring confrontation while becoming increasingly uncertain how to leave it. Factories depend upon military orders. Political legitimacy becomes entangled with claims about victory and sacrifice. Trading relationships rearrange themselves around sanctions. Allies and partners acquire new importance. Hundreds of thousands of deaths cannot easily be followed by an explanation that the original objectives no longer mattered.

None of this makes further escalation inevitable. States possess choices, and political leaders make them. But from inside a system already organised around war, the available futures can begin to look different. What appears from outside as restraint may appear from inside as defeat. What appears as an opportunity to stop may appear as the consolidation of an intolerable strategic position. Under those conditions, escalation can acquire its own terrible logic, not because victory is certain, but because the alternatives appear to be narrowing.

In Lithuania, Captain Eglė Petrauskaitė noticed nothing dramatic that September weekend. She spent Sunday afternoon visiting her father, who complained about the price of coffee and then complained that she checked her telephone during lunch. Eglė was thirty-four and had been

in the army long enough for relatives to stop asking whether she still intended to remain there. Her father had once regarded the profession as an eccentric phase. Now he followed military news with the enthusiasm of a man who knew enough to frighten himself and not enough to distinguish the significant from the merely noisy.

He asked whether the Russians were going to attack.

“No,” Eglė said.

She said it with more certainty than she possessed because uncertainty was not something you handed casually across a kitchen table.

There were allied troops in Lithuania, aircraft above the Baltic region, exercises, headquarters, reinforcement plans, railway schedules, warehouses and procedures created precisely so that a Russian attack would not be an attractive proposition. Europe's deterrence was physical. It existed in soldiers, concrete, steel, fuel, agreements, computer systems and timetables. But deterrence also depended upon something less visible: an adversary had to believe that all these separate things would behave as parts of one system when required.

Eglė understood this without expressing it in those words. Most people who maintain complex systems do not spend

much time admiring their complexity. They check whether the vehicle starts.

By October, she had begun seeing more reports from across the border. Some were routine, some unusual, some perhaps unusual only because everybody had become trained to look for unusual things. Equipment moved. Units exercised. Electronic interference came and went. The Baltic region had lived with disrupted satellite navigation for years. The problem was not seeing movement. It was determining which future the movement belonged to.

A civilian might imagine intelligence as knowledge accumulating until uncertainty disappears. In practice, information often multiplies uncertainty. Ten vehicles become twenty. Twenty could mean an exercise, reinforcement, deception, maintenance, dispersal or preparation for something that had not yet been decided.

At the end of October, Eglė drove to Kaunas in heavy rain and spent forty minutes behind a truck carrying timber. The windscreen wipers squeaked. Her sister called to remind her that their father's birthday was in two weeks. At a petrol station she bought coffee from a machine and answered three messages she was not supposed to answer while driving. That evening she read another report and stared for a little too long at a map.

Nothing had happened.

This is one of the difficulties of locating the beginning of a historical event. Afterwards, historians place a finger on a date. Beforehand, life continues producing groceries, arguments, invoices, birthday cakes, traffic jams and dirty laundry. The event approaches through a world that has no obligation to recognise it.

In early November, Maksim received a message instructing him to report to an administrative office on Tuesday morning. His mother read it twice, asked whether it was genuine and then telephoned her sister. His aunt said there were rumours of another mobilisation. There had always been rumours. Somebody's neighbour had been called. Somebody's son had been exempted. Somebody knew a man who had paid a doctor. Somebody knew another who had crossed into Kazakhstan. Every story contradicted another story and all of them somehow remained plausible.

On Tuesday, Maksim joined a queue.

Nobody played patriotic music. Nobody shouted. The room smelled of wet coats and overheated radiators. A young clerk with red fingernails asked for his documents without looking at him for more than a second. Another man gave him papers. There would be a medical examination. There would be training. The instructions were clear enough to prevent questions and vague enough not to answer the ones that mattered.

Maksim thought of Anton—not Anton the soldier from the photograph, but Anton at seventeen, throwing snow from the balcony onto people below and laughing when their mother screamed at him to stop.

On the way home, Maksim bought cigarettes although he had told his mother he had stopped.

The mobilisation was enormous when described statistically and strangely small when experienced individually. States speak in hundreds of thousands. People encounter one name: a man leaving a workplace, a locker emptied, a mother buying extra socks, a supervisor rearranging shifts. Military power is represented by tanks, missiles and aircraft because those things are visible and impressive, but an army is also a social extraction system. It takes cooks, mechanics, drivers, sons, electricians, programmers and warehouse workers from one pattern of life and inserts them into another.

Russia had been performing this extraction for years. It had learned how much could be removed from ordinary life without ordinary life stopping altogether. That knowledge was itself a form of military capability, though not one easily photographed at a parade. It was also a trap, because a society can become very good at surviving conditions it can no longer easily escape.

At a transport company outside Hamburg, Hanna Vogt noticed one of the first disturbances without knowing Maksim existed. She was forty-seven and responsible for routes nobody thought about when they worked. Industrial components came from one place, pharmaceutical packaging from another, chemicals from somewhere else. Finished goods moved towards ports and distribution centres according to schedules assembled from thousands of assumptions: roads would remain open, drivers would arrive, customs systems would respond, ferries would sail, insurance contracts would continue to mean tomorrow what they meant yesterday.

Modern logistics looked powerful because almost everything could be moved almost everywhere. It was also an enormous collection of promises.

In the second week of November, one of Hanna's Baltic partners asked whether contingency routes should be prepared. The request was not extraordinary. Companies planned for strikes, storms, accidents, cyberattacks and political disturbances. She opened a spreadsheet and began changing numbers. The route through Poland was longer. Fuel cost more. Driver hours became awkward. Another ferry connection might work.

She sent three emails and went to lunch.

The war, if it came, had already entered her spreadsheet.

No Russian soldier needed to know this. Systems begin protecting themselves before anyone orders them to. An insurer does not need a bridge to explode before increasing the price of crossing it. A probability changes, a premium follows, a ship changes route, a customer chooses another supplier, a port handles less cargo. Nothing has been destroyed, yet trade has already begun bending around the possibility of destruction. Preparation for disruption can itself become disruption.

That possibility lay close to the heart of the gamble.

A Russian attack on the Baltic states would make little sense if imagined simply as a contest in which Russia intended to become conventionally stronger than NATO. The imbalance of aggregate resources would remain enormous. A war does not have to be won to achieve one of war's most consequential effects: changing the political environment in which every later decision is made.

Europe is powerful because it is connected. Energy networks, digital systems, financial markets, ports, railways, roads, supply chains, open borders and political institutions bind the continent together. Those connections create prosperity and enormous collective capacity, but they also create pathways along which disruption can travel. The gamble would be that enough disruption could transform military pressure into political pressure.

Shipping becomes expensive. Energy prices rise. Markets fall. Communications fail. Governments disagree about escalation. Citizens become frightened. Businesses postpone investment. Refugees move. Military resources are diverted. Another crisis elsewhere suddenly becomes harder to manage. Every dependency activated by the attack adds another constituency asking how long the confrontation can continue.

Russia would not have to conquer Europe. It would have to persuade enough Europeans that resistance cost more than compromise.

In Lithuania, Eglė's leave for the end of November was cancelled.

Her father called.

“So it is serious.”

“It is precautionary.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means precautionary.”

He was silent for a moment before asking whether she had enough warm clothes.

She laughed, which irritated him.

By late November, temperatures had fallen. The first snow melted as soon as it touched the roads. Christmas decorations appeared in Vilnius. Shops filled their windows with lights, restaurants advertised December menus and children began asking how many days remained until Christmas.

Europe is very good at continuing.

That is not trivial. Continuity is one of the principal accomplishments of an organised society. Electricity arrives without ceremony. Water comes from taps. Trains leave because thousands of people performed tasks sufficiently well. Hospitals contain medicines whose components crossed several borders. Data moves through cables on seabeds almost nobody sees. Money crosses networks whose existence becomes visible mainly when they stop working.

Dependence is often mistaken for weakness because dependence means no component is sufficient by itself. But civilisation is dependence. The alternative is not strength. It is isolation and poverty.

The strategic question is what happens when those dependencies are deliberately disturbed.

On 3 December, Hanna received notification that a shipping company was temporarily adjusting operations in the Baltic

region. The wording was careful. She forwarded it to two colleagues. At 10:14 another message arrived asking whether deliveries could be guaranteed. She answered that they could not. At 11:02 the customer requested alternative routing. At 11:40 her manager asked for an assessment of exposure.

By lunchtime, Hanna had seventeen emails marked urgent.

Something may already have happened. There were reports involving an undersea communications cable, but nobody yet knew what had caused them. Satellite navigation was unreliable in parts of the region. A Lithuanian government website had become inaccessible. Social media supplied explanations faster than authorities supplied facts: Russian sabotage, NATO provocation, fishing equipment, cyberattack, accident, false flag. Somebody posted an old photograph of a burning ship and received twelve thousand reposts.

Uncertainty was becoming productive.

Power is usually imagined as the ability to make another actor do something. In a complex system, it may be enough to make millions of actors uncertain about what they should do. They begin adjusting themselves. They cancel, reroute, postpone, store, withdraw, hedge and evacuate. No one commands the whole reaction. A modern society can injure itself while trying to protect itself.

That evening, Eglė slept in a room with seven other officers. One snored. Someone's alarm went off at 04:50. The coffee was terrible. At breakfast a lieutenant showed her a photograph of his dog wearing a child's Christmas hat.

For centuries, writers have struggled with the grotesque coexistence of the enormous and the ordinary. A battle begins while somebody has toothache. A government falls while someone searches for a missing glove. A refugee worries about a cat left behind. History never succeeds in occupying the whole human mind.

At 06:23 Eglė's telephone vibrated.

The message was short enough that she read it twice.

Several things then happened quickly, although later she would remember them slowly. A chair scraped across the floor. Someone swore. The lights flickered, recovered, then flickered again. Another officer said communications with one position had been lost. Somebody asked whether this was an exercise.

Nobody answered.

Maksim had been sitting inside an armoured vehicle for almost three hours. He was cold. The man opposite him was called Denis and was twenty-six. Denis had a daughter who had recently learned to write her own name, a fact

Maksim knew because Denis had shown everybody the photograph repeatedly.

They had surrendered their telephones earlier. The engine produced a vibration that climbed through Maksim's boots and into his legs. He had not slept properly and did not know exactly where they were. Officers had spoken about readiness, hostile forces and national security. There had been maps, but Maksim had learned quickly that maps shown to soldiers did not necessarily explain what soldiers were going to do.

He wondered whether Anton had sat somewhere like this.

Then the vehicle moved.

At approximately the same time, Hanna's computer displayed a message informing her that one of the company's routing systems was unavailable. She clicked refresh. Nothing. She tried again.

Someone across the office said, “Is yours down too?”

Her manager emerged holding a telephone.

The first confirmed news alert arrived several minutes later.

Russian forces had crossed into Lithuanian territory.

The sentence was astonishingly small. It fitted easily on a telephone screen. The invasion of a NATO member state,

an event capable of rearranging European history, arrived between a message from Hanna's daughter about a university assignment and a notification from an online shop offering twenty percent off winter clothing.

For several seconds nobody in the office spoke.

Then everyone did.

War entered Europe as simultaneous administrative failure. Airlines reviewed routes. Governments activated emergency procedures. Military commands issued orders written long before anybody expected to use them. Railway capacity acquired a second meaning because a railway carrying commuters could also carry armour. Ports became strategic assets. Bridges became calculations. Warehouses became reserves. Cybersecurity teams abandoned routine work. Financial institutions examined exposure. Hospitals checked supplies.

The same network that had seemed banal on 2 December became strategic on 3 December. The infrastructure had not changed; its meaning had.

A road is civilian until an army needs it. A ferry is commercial until reinforcement depends upon it. A mobile network is convenient until command depends upon it. A warehouse is boring until the replacement part inside

becomes unavailable. A dependency becomes visible when interruption reveals what was depending upon it.

The first hours produced contradictory accounts. Some reports described a limited penetration. Others claimed multiple incursions. Videos appeared before they could be verified. NATO aircraft were in the air. Polish forces moved. Lithuania announced measures that had sounded theoretical in documents and suddenly meant people were being telephoned at home.

Article 5 appeared everywhere.

Most Europeans had heard the phrase. Fewer had thought about what it meant operationally. The North Atlantic Treaty contained no magic mechanism by which millions of soldiers instantly appeared at a border. Collective defence depended upon political decisions, military readiness and the ability to move people and equipment through actual space.

Now the abstraction had to become traffic.

In north-eastern Poland, railway dispatcher Katarzyna Wolska received instructions that several civilian services would be altered. She had worked on the railway for twenty-three years. Her husband taught chemistry. Their eldest son lived in Wrocław. Their younger daughter had recently announced that she intended to become a tattoo

artist, which Katarzyna had regarded as a catastrophe until 3 December revised her understanding of catastrophe.

Military trains had priority. Passengers became angry. Some cried. Some filmed everything. At one station a man screamed at an employee who knew nothing about anything. Katarzyna stared at a screen full of movements that had become incomprehensibly important.

A railway timetable is an argument against chaos. It assumes space can be divided into routes, time into slots and movement into sequence. Two trains cannot occupy the same section of track. A delay in one place becomes another delay elsewhere. Add military traffic, frightened passengers, diverted freight and intermittent communications, and the railway becomes a diagram of dependency under pressure.

Yet the trains continued moving, and this mattered because complexity has another property besides fragility: it contains alternatives. Another port exists. Another road exists. A local administrator ignores a procedure because the procedure no longer fits. A technician improvises. A company accepts a loss. A government releases reserves. An ally sends equipment. A railway dispatcher finds another path through the timetable.

Dependence creates vulnerability, but interdependence can also create redundancy.

The gamble depended upon a particular reading of Europe: that its interconnectedness had made it rich, efficient and comfortable, but also too dependent to absorb sustained disruption. Break enough connections and Europe might begin bargaining with itself before it could organise resistance.

There was logic in this calculation. Complexity can produce fragility. A tightly coupled system transmits failure rapidly. One port closes, freight moves elsewhere, roads congest, driver hours are exceeded, warehouses wait, production slows. A cyberattack disables one system and forces traffic into another already operating near capacity. Fear travels faster than repairs.

But no one could know in advance which property of the network would dominate: vulnerability or redundancy.

Maksim understood none of it. His world had contracted to perhaps twenty metres. There was noise outside. Someone shouted. Denis was no longer talking about his daughter. The rear door opened and cold air entered.

Maksim climbed out.

He saw trees, dirty snow, another vehicle, men running. He could not tell whether they were still in Russia, in Belarus, in Lithuania or in some intermediate geography created by orders he had obeyed without understanding.

He was nineteen years old and carrying a rifle.

The abstraction called Russian military power existed now partly in his hands.

This is one of history's obscenities. The people transformed into instruments of state power are often those with the least power over the decision that transformed them. Maksim had not chosen a theory of European security. Eglė had not chosen Russia's war. Hanna had not chosen NATO. Katarzyna had not chosen escalation. Yet each was now located inside the machinery through which those abstractions became real.

History from above is deceptive because it has verbs.

Russia attacked. NATO responded. Poland mobilised. Markets fell. Europe adapted.

Countries appear to act like persons. From below, every verb breaks into millions of smaller ones. Someone drove. Someone signed. Someone refused. Someone repaired. Someone hid. Someone opened a warehouse. Someone switched a railway signal. Someone translated an order. Someone carried a wounded man. Someone went to work despite being afraid.

The great actor called Europe existed nowhere except in these accumulated acts.

By the second day, Hanna had stopped answering every email immediately. There were too many. She and three colleagues created categories. Essential medical shipments came first. Certain industrial deliveries could wait. A route through the Baltic was suspended. Freight was transferred west. Costs were no longer the first consideration.

She telephoned a customer and told him his delivery would be four days late.

He began complaining, then stopped halfway through the sentence.

“Four days is fine,” he said.

A remarkably large part of social resilience consists of people changing what they are willing to tolerate.

Efficiency had governed the network in peacetime. Efficiency disliked spare capacity, duplication, unused warehouses, idle vehicles and expensive alternatives. War changed the value of waste. The empty warehouse became useful. The slower route became valuable. The old generator that had seemed inefficient suddenly represented continuity.

Resilience is expensive precisely because most of its assets look unnecessary until something fails.

Across Europe, governments rediscovered this fact simultaneously. The disruption spread, but not always in the direction an aggressor might have expected. Petrol stations experienced queues. Supermarkets sold unusual quantities of water and batteries. Financial markets shuddered. Airports tightened security. False reports proliferated faster than governments could correct them.

Yet beneath the panic, another process began. People learned.

Rumours that had produced immediate reactions in the morning produced scepticism by evening. Companies discovered which alternative routes worked. Administrations identified bottlenecks. Engineers isolated damaged systems. Military units moved through infrastructure prepared for precisely this possibility.

The system under attack was becoming a different system.

Biology does something comparable constantly. A living organism disturbed by its environment does not preserve itself by remaining unchanged. It redirects energy, closes openings, repairs tissue, sacrifices functions and remembers. Societies are not organisms, but the analogy becomes useful once resilience is understood not as hardness but as the ability to rearrange oneself without ceasing to function.

Russia offered a warning about what happens next.

A system that successfully adapts to pressure does not simply become its old self with stronger walls. It becomes organised around the pressure. Temporary arrangements become institutions. Emergency production becomes industry. New trading relationships become dependencies. Military expenditure creates constituencies. Threats become assumptions around which future decisions are made.

Survival changes the survivor.

Europe might therefore resist the attack and still be transformed by it. The railway adapted for military movement would remain a railway whose military purpose could no longer be forgotten. The warehouse created as strategic reserve would become part of future planning. Defence budgets would acquire new political constituencies. Borders would carry different meanings. Citizens who had once regarded war as something happening elsewhere would have learned that elsewhere was a temporary geographical category.

Resilience was not restoration. It was transformation.

By the third evening, Eglė had slept perhaps four hours in two days. She was eating soup from a paper cup. Her father had sent nine messages. The final one said only:

We are fine. Do your work.

She read it several times.

Around her, people moved through a building whose doors no longer seemed capable of closing quietly. Telephones rang. Boots crossed corridors. Somebody had placed a box of mandarins on a table. One had rolled onto the floor and nobody had picked it up.

She suddenly wanted it picked up.

The desire was absurd and overwhelming.

Eglė bent down, retrieved the mandarin and returned it to the box.

This is also history, not because the mandarin mattered, but because Eglė did.

Theories of power tend to erase this level of reality. They speak of capabilities, force ratios, deterrence, escalation, strategic depth and alliance cohesion. All are useful concepts. None can substitute for the people through whom power must pass.

A state can possess enormous military resources and still discover that possession is not control. It can initiate an event and lose control of the consequences. An attack intended to expose dependency may instead activate it.

Railways connect because armies can travel along them, but allies can travel along them too. Digital networks spread

panic but also information. Markets transmit fear but redirect resources. Alliances create obligations that can produce hesitation, but obligations can also compel action. The very connectedness that makes a complex society vulnerable to disturbance permits the disturbance to be redistributed.

There is no guarantee which property will dominate. A network may collapse in one place and adapt in another. It may become more cohesive in response to precisely the pressure intended to divide it. Or it may endure militarily while political willingness slowly erodes behind the front.

That uncertainty was the gamble.

On the fourth day, Katarzyna returned home shortly before midnight. Her husband had left food in the refrigerator. She stood in the kitchen without removing her coat and ate cold potatoes with a fork.

On television, a map showed arrows.

She disliked the arrows because they made everything appear comprehensible. A red arrow moved west. A blue arrow moved east. A presenter explained what might happen next.

Katarzyna switched the television off.

For her, the war had no arrows. It had platform changes, delayed trains, telephone calls, frightened passengers and instructions rewritten three times in an afternoon.

Maksim's mother also watched television. She had received no message from her son. She sat at the kitchen table with Anton's boots near the door and Maksim's empty chair opposite her. The television described operational developments.

She turned the volume down.

In Germany, Hanna finally left the office at 21:30 and discovered frost on her windscreen. She scraped it away with a supermarket loyalty card because she could not find the scraper.

In Lithuania, Eglė drank another coffee.

None of them knew whether the war would last a week or ten years. None knew what agreement might end it, which politicians would claim victory, what borders would appear on future maps or what names historians would give to the opening days of December.

They knew only what had to be done next.

This is perhaps the most misleading thing about the phrase making history. Very few people experience themselves

making history. They experience themselves trying to make Tuesday work.

The railway must move. The patient needs medicine. The message must reach someone. The child must be collected. The vehicle must start. The frightened mother must be called. The damaged cable must be repaired. The soldier must decide whether to obey.

From these acts emerge the capacities that later appear in books as national strength.

The logic of such an attack would rest on the assumption that Europe could be weakened by activating its dependencies. There would have been logic in the calculation. Russia itself had spent years learning how pressure travels through complex societies and how societies reorganise themselves in response. Sanctions, military losses, disrupted trade and diplomatic isolation had not produced the simple collapse once imagined by some of Russia's adversaries.

Russia had adapted.

Perhaps that experience could produce a dangerous inference: if pressure had transformed Russia without defeating it, sufficient pressure might transform Europe too.

But there was no reason the transformation had to favour Moscow.

What if the port closing caused another port to expand? What if frightened allies became less divided? What if expensive redundancy became politically acceptable? What if a railway built for commuters became a military artery? What if populations tolerated costs that had seemed politically impossible a week earlier? What if millions of ordinary people began rearranging the system faster than the disturbance could disorganise it?

Then the attacker would face something other than the Europe it had chosen to attack.

It would face the Europe the attack itself had begun creating.

And here the two systems confronted the same darker possibility.

Russia had already been transformed by years of confrontation. Europe might now transform itself in response. Each adaptation could make the other's fear more reasonable. Russian militarisation would justify European militarisation. European militarisation would confirm Russian narratives of encirclement. Temporary deployments would become permanent. Permanent deployments would alter planning. Planning would alter expectations.

Two systems could begin reorganising themselves around the existence of the other as a threat. At that point, adaptation would cease to be merely the way the confrontation was survived. It could become part of what kept the confrontation alive.

By the first Sunday of the war, snow lay properly on the ground in Lithuania. Somewhere beside a railway line, a maintenance crew worked in darkness beneath portable lights. Their names would almost certainly never enter a history book.

A few hundred kilometres away, Eglė stood outdoors and watched her breath appear in front of her. Far to the east, Maksim sat against the wall of a building whose name he did not know. Denis slept beside him. In Hamburg, Hanna's revised shipping plan had already been replaced by another revised shipping plan. In Poland, Katarzyna moved another train north.

None of them knew whether the gamble had worked.

Perhaps Europe would fracture under the pressure. Perhaps governments would begin searching for a settlement simply to make the disruption stop. Perhaps political cohesion would prove less durable than military plans assumed.

Or perhaps the attack would produce precisely the opposite result. Dependencies would become connections. Hesitation

would become commitment. Redundancies once dismissed as waste would become necessities. A continent accustomed to thinking of peace as the normal condition of political life would begin organising itself around the possibility that peace could no longer be assumed.

Russia would not have to defeat NATO for its gamble to succeed. It would only have to make Europeans decide that resisting cost too much.

But Europe did not have to remain the Europe upon which that calculation had been based.

Later, historians would give these days a shape. They would identify decisions, failures and turning points. They would argue about what Moscow intended, whether NATO reacted quickly enough, which governments hesitated and which choices prevented something worse. Maps would acquire arrows. December would acquire a before and an after.

The people inside it would know none of that yet. They would know interrupted trains, unread messages, missing sons, frozen windscreens, late deliveries, false rumours, cancelled leave and telephone batteries running low. They would experience history in the peculiar way people usually do: not as history, but as the suddenly altered conditions of an ordinary life.

The gamble had been that Europe could be forced to discover its dependencies as weaknesses before it learned to use them as strengths.

Whether that gamble succeeded could not yet be known.

Something else could.

If Russian forces had really crossed that border on 3 December, Europe would never again be quite the Europe that had existed on 2 December.

Whatever followed—victory, defeat, compromise, escalation or some untidy mixture of all four—the continent would reorganise itself around the knowledge that this had happened once and therefore could happen again. Budgets would change. Railways would change. Alliances would change. Politics would change. Families would change. The meaning of borders would change.

Russia, too, would have crossed a boundary from which there could be no simple return. A state already transformed by one war would have extended that transformation into the political architecture of an entire continent.

Europe had been remade by war before.

If this December ever came, it would be remade by war again.